



Thanksgiving is fast approaching. Many of us will be sitting around a festive table with our family (biological or self-made); others may be spending part, if not all, of their day helping out at open kitchens and homeless shelters trying to instill in all too many hungry people a small ray of happiness and helping to ease the pain of an empty stomach.

The all-important common thread that everyone will share is an attempt to express the gratitude deep in their hearts. Some are able to express this verbally, others silently; some find it easy to express, others struggle to find the nugget of gratitude deep within. Why is it that the question at the Thanksgiving "Table", "What are you grateful for?" invariably elicits a few groans of dread?

Robert A. Emmons, Ph.D is considered the leading scientific expert on gratitude and has compiled a great deal of valuable information on the subject. First off, gratitude does not come naturally. We have to bring the concept of gratitude into our conscious thought and develop it. We have to review our thoughts and ask ourselves: Is this a thought that honors the feeling of gratitude? Or is this thought a reflection of ungratefulness? I don't think very many of us consciously express ungratefulness, but think about it for a while.

- Are our statements abundantly pessimistic?
- Do our statements come from a perceived position of entitlement?
- Do we emphasize: Scarcity over abundance?
 - Deprivation over satisfaction?
 - Life's burdens over life's gifts?
- Are we bored, apathetic, or complacent in the living of our lives?

Further challenges in developing gratitude are:

- Being in the midst of overwhelming suffering or grief. (Although these are obstacles to gratitude people have found gratefulness in the worst of times.)
- Attaching a sense of obligation and indebtedness to the concept of gratitude.
- Thinking that grateful people just stop trying to do things to further their lives due to a “false” sense of satisfaction.
- Gratefulness is just another form of positive thinking.

If the answer is yes to a few of the above, it’s time to start “cultivating” gratitude in our lives. But to cultivate gratitude we first have to know what gratitude is. Emmons has some thoughts on this as well. Gratitude goes beyond expressing a fleeting thanks for a gift or a kindness. True gratitude is developing the habit of looking for and finding things in and around your life and seeing each as a gift. Gratitude is making this a life pattern of behavior, recognizing not only feelings of gratitude for what we have but also for what we give. Emmons suggests keeping a gratitude journal and writing in it nightly what you experienced during your day that instilled the feeling of gratitude. (If you already keep a daily journal just add a gratitude section.) Keeping an account of daily blessings in your life keeps gratitude in your consciousness and affirms both the goodness and the sources of goodness that are present.

Are there any benefits to living a grateful life? There sure are! Dr. Emmons’ studies have recorded a great deal over the years. Gratitude has shown overall improvements in health, happiness, feelings of well-being, increased optimism, and a greater sense of purpose in life.

Psychologically, people consciously and consistently experiencing gratitude in their lives are more alert, more energetic, more enthused, and more attentive. Their levels of irritability and hostility are decreased.

Physically, grateful people exercise more, experience better sleep, have fewer symptoms of pain and discomfort, adopt healthy behaviors, and seem to follow up on personal health issues. Gratefulness has also been found to lower blood pressure.

In the area of interpersonal relations grateful people are more outgoing and helpful, develop a sense of altruism; and feel less lonely and isolated. They give credit to others when things go correctly and share or admit their responsibility when things go wrong. They expect that certain situations in life are beyond their control.

Overall, grateful people experience more success in life, work harder toward goals, have an increased degree of satisfaction, are more forgiving, generous, charitable, and compassionate. They are more inclined to lead groups into action (less complacent) and to do more good deeds and volunteerism.

Dr. Emmons has concluded that developing a lifetime attitude of gratitude has the power to heal and energize the body overall and can be life-changing.

So as you were seated at the Thanksgiving Table this year think of the deeper ramifications of gratefulness. Maybe you will be the first to volunteer to answer that question, "What are you grateful for?"

With Gratitude,

Kai